

Home Truths

Tenants' tales of council housing

Arch
The Association of Retained Council Housing





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Introduction

Jennifer Holmes, chair of the ARCH Tenants' Group

Welcome to *Home Truths: Tenants' tales of council housing*.

ARCH was set up by and for councils whose tenants chose to stick with their local authority as their landlord when other options were presented. The ARCH Tenants' group, which I chair, ensures the views of tenants are reflected in its policies.

The group's members are keen to dispel false myths about council housing.

We are not claiming everything is perfect. Council housing has been starved of resources and many tenants are facing great difficulties. But we believe council housing has for too long been negatively stereotyped and it's time to show the more upbeat side of life in local authority homes from the point of view of people who live in them.

I, personally, live in a council property in West Lancashire and am proud to do so. In the pages that follow, other people who live in local authority properties discuss the positive aspects of council housing. Tenants in a range of situations discuss how important their council home is to them; not just as a roof over their head, but in providing security upon which to build lives and communities.

Home Truths starts with A Brief History of Council Housing, which shows the rise and fall from its heyday to what might be

regarded as its down-point, when it became stigmatised and starved of resources.

The old council housing finance system did not work and we tenants were angry that a huge proportion of our rent was disappearing into a national pot. ARCH's campaign for a 'fair deal for all our residents' has been successful in getting rid of that system. ARCH hopes that the new self-financing funding system as of April 2012 will help return council housing to its heyday.

Showing the more positive side of council homes is an important part of moving forward.

Information on ARCH's tenant governance arrangements can also be found here, along with comments from some members of the Tenants' Group, who provide a regional network representing fellow tenants across England.

I hope this is the start of a new, more positive era for stock retained councils and their tenants. There are certainly challenges ahead and funding is tight. But the fact that more than a million people chose to stick with their council as their landlord is testament to the popularity of local authority housing – as interviews with people who live in council homes around the country show.

I hope you enjoy reading what council residents have to say.

Council housing timeline

2000

2012 Self-financing arrangements come into effect meaning councils take control of housing finance in return for taking on debt.

2011 *Localism and Decentralisation Bill* paves the way for locally controlled housing finance.

2010 Homes and Community Agency programme provides grants for new council housing for the first time in decades.

2009 Government announced a review of the unpopular Housing Revenue Account finance system.

2008 ARCH Tenants' Group established to ensure effective tenant governance of the organisation.

2005 ARCH was set up to fight for a better deal for council tenants.

1986 *Housing and Planning Act* introduced the process of Housing Options Appraisals and stock transfer to housing associations.

1980 *Right to Buy* legislation meant 1m council properties were sold over the next ten years.

1977 *Homeless Persons Act* duties for local authorities to assist homeless families.

1975 The handbook *Getting Tenants Involved* was published to promote tenant-participation schemes and local authorities began initiatives to engage tenants in decision-making.

1968 Gas explosion at Ronan Point in London marked the end of council high rise construction programmes.

1960s Tenants' and residents' associations across the country expressed dissatisfaction.

1956 *Housing Subsidies Act* encouraged the construction of high rise local authority blocks.

1954 Construction of local authority homes peaked at 348,000.

1948 National Association of Tenants and Residents set up.

1946 *New Towns Act* led to the first new town in Stevenage.

1944 *Temporary Accommodation Act* allowed the construction of pre-fabs.

1942 *Beveridge Report* heralded construction of 4m new homes over the next decade.

1939-45 Around 750,000 properties were damaged during the Second World War leading to huge housing shortages.

1932 Becontree in Barking and Dagenham was the largest council estate in Europe with the completion of 27,000 properties.

1930 *Housing Act* introduced new subsidies to encourage slum clearance.

1925 *Housing Act* facilitated construction of 50,000 council homes a year on average for the next decade.

1919 The *Homes Fit For Heroes* Initiative launched for soldiers returning from the First World War.

1918 *Housing and Town Planning Act* began a local authority housing drive and the Tudor Walters report made layout recommendations for public housing.

1913 *Tenants' Defence League* formed in Leeds.

1896 The Boundary Estate built by London County Council on slum clearance land is the oldest surviving example of local authority housing.

1890 Local authorities began large-scale housing work.

1865 The *Housing of the Working Classes Act* gave local authorities slum clearance powers and allowed Public Works Commissioner loans.

1950

1900

A brief history of council housing

Council housing has had its ups and downs over the last hundred and fifty years. The origins of local authority building date back to the 1860s, when it was first recognised that public housing should be provided for people who were crammed into unsanitary conditions and paying exorbitant rents to slum landlords.

Council housing remained linked to slum clearance programmes throughout much of the 1900s. Early council developments, such as the Boundary Estate in Shoreditch, had higher rents than private rented accommodation and tended to house the so called ‘respectable poor’.

The *Homes Fit for Heroes* initiative to provide good standard housing for the families of soldiers returning from the First World War led to estates of cottage-style brick houses with gardens that have proved enduringly popular. Local authorities were the main vehicle for delivering around one million publicly funded homes during the inter-war years. At its heyday in the 1940s and 1950s, politicians of all parties vied to build the most council homes, with construction of local authority properties reaching its peak at 348,000 in 1954.

French architect Le Corbusier’s concept of ‘streets in the sky’ coupled with a desire to build at great volume as quickly as possible led to the proliferation of high-rise blocks in the 1960s. But these were constructed using pre-cast systems techniques and poor materials, creating future sub-standard housing that became beset by social problems. The gas explosion at Ronan Point, London in 1968 led to a rethink about the way in which high-rise blocks were constructed and managed.

Council housing remained an option of choice for millions of individuals and families until the late 1970s, with one in three of the British population living in local authority owned

properties in 1979, according to Office of National Statistics figures. But council housing lost favour politically and *Right to Buy* legislation in 1980 meant one million council homes were privately purchased over the next ten years alone.

From the mid-1980s onwards, local authorities were encouraged to transfer their stock to housing associations and Arms Length Management Organisations. Council housing became stigmatised and regarded as a last resort for the worst off, rather than an option of choice. The proportion of people living in council housing had dropped to only 9% by 2007 and local authorities in England built just 380 homes in 2009.

ARCH was set up to provide a collective voice for councils whose tenants had chosen their local authority as their landlord. One million tenants wanted to stay with their council, despite financial incentives for other models. ARCH has argued for stock retained councils to have equal access to resources as other social housing providers and campaigned for a fair deal for residents.

The need for tenants to have a say in decisions about their homes has been increasingly recognised and tenant representation is now an integral part of council housing. Stock retention is unique in providing a direct democratic connection between residents and the ballot box. The ARCH Tenants’ Group was established in 2008 to ensure the views of those who live in council housing are reflected in its policies and activities. Details of the group are on page 18.

ARCH is pleased that the Review of the Housing Revenue Account subsidy system, launched in 2009, has resulted in new self-financing arrangements for local authority housing. ARCH and the tenants it represents are ambitious for a positive future for council housing.



Tenants tell their stories of council housing

Barry Duckett *Southwark*

‘I’ll never forget the day we signed up for our first flat,’ Barry Duckett, who lives in a maisonette on the Canada Estate, reminisces. ‘You were vetted to make sure you had a job and could pay and there were strict rules council residents had to abide by in those days.’

Now 60, a father of two and grandfather of three, Barry has lived in the area with his wife Jan since they were first married in the 1960s. ‘The first flat was very basic. The bath was in the kitchen and the joke was that you could have a bath and stir the soup at the same time,’ he laughs.

‘My parents were council tenants; in those days if you worked in a manual trade after the war like my dad did, you got on the list and got a flat. When you got your first flat you were made for life. The rents were sensible, you had somewhere you could bring your kids up and it was a community. I worked at Surrey Docks and it was all dock workers and their families locally then.’

Mandy Hardwick *West Lancashire*

Mandy is catering manager at a local school for children with special needs and has lived in the same council house in West Lancashire for 22 years.

The three-bedroom terrace house on the Charnock estate in Skelmersdale is home to Mandy, her fifteen year old son and her daughter, who is deputy manager at a local business. Her elder son and his girlfriend, who are students, and their baby also live there at present.

The 41 year old cooks for 50 children and staff every day, ‘The children love my food, which is all freshly made.’

Barry has been a tenant representative for most of his life: ‘We make sure that we get things done and keep it to a decent standard.’ He would like to see councils build more homes as London house prices are unaffordable for most people and is angry that council housing has been starved of resources. ‘My sons live in council housing locally. They’ve got decent jobs but prices have gone through the roof here - it costs £475k for a two bedroom flat now. If you are working in Tesco’s across the road on a basic wage, for example, you could never afford a mortgage here. There is a shortage of housing and it would help the economy to build more.’

‘I believe the council tenancy has been the mainstay of my life here.’

‘There is still a sense of community around here. When someone moves in I always go round and make them feel welcome. The old people appreciate a knock on the door to say hello and make sure they are ok.’

There are only 67 houses on her estate, one of the smallest estates in Skelmersdale. ‘I love it here. I always say that if I won the lottery I’d stay put. There are some private houses as well as council houses here and everybody mingles. I went out and campaigned to stay with the council rather than transfer. If there is ever a problem they are out within a couple of days. I get good service – you can always speak to somebody. When I started work, they sorted out all the paperwork and it all joins up – for example, they send texts out as a reminder to pay council tax, which is useful.’



‘We had a big community centre built that was really appreciated, where there was bingo and dancing.’

Rene Brown: championing community life

Birmingham City Council

Rene Brown certainly knows a thing or two about council housing. At the age of 82, she has lived in local authority homes in Birmingham for most of her life and worked tirelessly for her local community.

Now a great-grandmother, she brought her two sons up in council housing. ‘I was glad to get a council property in 1952. Before that, we were paying six shillings and nine pence a week for a place that had an outside toilet, no running water and people were living in terrible conditions. We moved into a flat on the seventh floor of Queens Tower, Nechells Park Road that had big bedrooms, a bathroom and loads of space.

‘My children went to the local school. The other tenants were nice and were always doing things for the kids. Then we had a big community centre built that was really appreciated, where there was bingo and dancing.’

A growing family meant a council transfer: ‘I had been in a flat with kids and wanted a house. I applied to the council for a transfer and we got a lovely new-build place in Aston. It was called a municipal house then. You had pride in living in a municipal house.’

She started volunteering at a club for disabled people and has been involved in community groups ever since, which has included chairing tenants’ boards and setting up a co-operative. She learned to type and use a computer at the community centre and has been vocal in her fight to improve neighbourhoods. ‘There were some great people in Aston and the opportunities were there to get involved in all sorts of things on the estate. I was always busy and always a bit feisty in saying what I thought’, she laughs.

She lives alone now after being happily married for 60 years and is tenants’ representative for the Poplars. ‘It isn’t perfect but I love it. There are people who do repairs and look after the garden. I have a lovely one bedroom flat with a big bedroom and a lovely kitchen. There are some things that could be done better, but I have got a lot of praise for what’s going on.’

She is hopeful that council housing will once again be the centre of stronger communities: ‘Things are changing and people are taking pride in their homes again. Housing is connected to other council services and police reps are always at meetings. There is a vast improvement now.’



'It means the world to us to be here and it's made such a difference to our lives'

Families in North Kesteven: turning houses into homes

Young families in North Kesteven are happily turning new houses built by the district council into homes. The council is half way through a £3.7m programme, which will provide a total of 35 new properties locally. It has also recently secured £1.1m for a further round of 11 homes. These are in addition to the 3,804 units the council in Lincolnshire already owns and manages.

The families that are moving into the new properties have expressed their appreciation of the benefits of secure tenancies in affordable, environmentally friendly properties that provide a solid base for family life.

Stephanie Sims was overjoyed to move into a new property at Cumberland Avenue with her husband Tim and young child.

After being on the waiting list for two years with supply of housing severely limited, she faced a long wait. But not only did she land a brand new house in Wellingore, it was on the street where she's lived in all her life. 'Because I've always lived here and Tim lived next-door-but-one for 11 years, it's like a dream that we can set up our first home on the same street. I still can't believe we're here and that it's so nice,' she says. 'We can all live together now as a proper family in a house that's really spacious and warm,' Tim says.

All the new North Kesteven District Council homes have extra insulation and high energy-efficiency levels, which mean fuel bills will be kept to a minimum. They are built to high quality and accessible standards in areas of greatest need.

Sarah Marshall and Darren Smith worked hard at DIY to make sure they would be comfortable in their home on Grayson Green, Wellingore. After 18 months on the waiting list, Sarah says: 'We're all really looking to put down roots because Wellingore's such a lovely village. We all feel like we've got somewhere we want to stay.' Their two children have made a good start, playing out in safer, quieter streets than they have been used to previously and making friends with neighbouring children.

Sally Newey comments: 'It means the world to us to be here and it's made such a difference to our lives,'. Moving from private rented accommodation into her new council home with partner David Vincent and two sons has halved their rent and doubled their available space.

'What's really nice is that we are safe in the knowledge that we're secure here and that we have a big organisation like the council behind us that won't let us down,' says David. 'It really has changed our lives substantially to be here.'



‘My plans are to do counselling, health and social care training next so I can get a job helping people with drug and alcohol problems.’

Erica Simpkins: turning things around

Stroud District Council

Erica Simpkins lives on the Kingshill estate, which is part of Stroud District Council’s stock of 5,300 homes. She has now been sober for almost three years. Prior to this, her struggle with alcoholism had led her into debt and her home was in danger of repossession. ‘When I was going through a repossession order the council staff were brilliant because they knew I wanted to get better and helped me find the support I needed to recover instead of just kicking me out. My local housing officer was fantastic.

‘I went into rehab and an organisation called *Positive Futures* helped me sort out all my debts and got me into a local community project, where I did Maths and English, health and social care courses. Now I just want to learn and learn. My plans are to do counselling, health and social care training next so I can get a job in that field. I want to help other people with drug and alcohol problems.’

Erica, who is forty years old, lives in a low-rise block of four flats. She is now a tenant representative on her estate, where she has lived since 1989. ‘I’ve got a lovely little flat,’ she says.

As someone who has got back on her feet after years of alcoholism, she is all too aware of the link between addiction, mental health issues and homelessness. ‘Maintaining tenancies is difficult because if you’ve got an addiction all your money goes on that. Mental health, addiction and housing all impact on each other and the professionals should all work together to deal with them in a joined up way.

‘I have been sober for nearly three years and my life has changed completely. It definitely helps having secure tenure. Having a place to call home that you feel safe in gives you your pride, self esteem and confidence.’



‘It’s absolutely beautiful here. My neighbours are lovely. The lawn is mowed, the warden visits and I don’t have to worry about any repairs.’

Maria Hanson: charity beginning at home

South Derbyshire

Maria is something of a celebrity in her quiet street in Ticknall, South Derbyshire. The fifty-seven-year-old featured on the Channel 4 television programme *The Secret Millionaire* and has since been befriended by impresario David Guest. The music producer was so impressed by the charity Maria runs from her council home that he donated limited-edition memorabilia and signed artwork from stars such as the Beatles and Michael Jackson, which have been sold to fund its work.

Maria’s charity, *Me & Dee*, has brought joy to more than 200 terminally ill people over the past four and a half years by fulfilling wishes and providing gifts, memorable outings and treats. ‘People are amazed at what happens in this quiet little street,’ she says.

She has worked courageously from her small terraced bungalow in Chapel Street despite a long history of painful spine and neurological conditions.

‘I couldn’t have done this without the help of the council,’ she says. She became homeless when getting over her fifteenth

operation. ‘Being over 50, single and disabled meant I had to go into sheltered accommodation, which bothered me at first because I am so much younger than the other residents,’ she says, ‘but I really like it here now.’ Having an emergency bracelet means there is less stress placed on her grown up daughters. ‘It’s absolutely beautiful here. My neighbours are lovely. The lawn is mowed, the warden visits and I don’t have to worry about any repairs.’

Importantly for someone who has spent a lot of time in hospital and recovering from operations, having a South Derbyshire District Council home provides a safe base and enables her to run her charity from home using a laptop. ‘I really value the security that this isn’t just a six month tenancy. I am here for as long as I want to be and that’s a massive relief.’

Maria finds her garden therapeutic. She has been runner up in two council competitions; for tubs, pots and baskets in 2009 and most improved garden in 2010. Her garden, pictured on the inside cover of this publication, is full of unusual plants and she says the council’s competitions, ‘encourage people to take pride and do something different.’



Robert with other participants in the GOALS programme, second from the left on the back row.

Robert MacPhee: making the right moves

Broxtowe

Eighteen year-old Robert Macphee is making the most of opportunities offered by Broxtowe Borough Council to help him look after himself and his accommodation and find work.

Robert was staying in supported accommodation following a period of homelessness when his support worker referred him to the authority's pre-tenancy training programme in Summer 2010.

The five-week 'Make the Right Move' course has sessions on how to manage a tenancy, plus cookery and healthy eating, budgeting and maintenance. He says: 'The tenancy training

has helped me and I now feel much more confident before I move into my own flat.'

During the course there was a special session designed to improve young people's confidence and self esteem. The GOALS session allowed young people to think about their futures and long-term ambitions. The one-day session was so successful that it was followed up with a two-day programme in early 2011. Robert attended these sessions, which enabled him to develop practical, job-seeking tools. He says: 'I really enjoyed the GOALS programme and it has helped me to think about my future and where I want to be. I now feel that I can tackle anything.'



Colin Reynolds: mixing independence and support

Cambridge

Cambridge City Council tenant Colin Reynolds moved into sheltered accommodation four and a half years ago. At 80 years old, this is his first experience of council housing.

‘I was in business for many years and when I got divorced I lost the house and lived in rented accommodation’. He says he is ‘very satisfied’ with his one bedroom flat near Ditton. ‘It’s better having the council as my landlord. I like

the mixture of independence and support I get here. The Independent Living Facilitators are very helpful.

‘I am interested in cooking and ideally I’d like a kitchen twice the size, but otherwise it’s perfect. There’s a good community spirit. The gardeners come in regularly and it’s good value for what I pay. I couldn’t expect any more.

‘There are 26 properties here and 20 of them are occupied by ladies, so I am a bit spoilt’, he adds jokingly.



The current Tenants Group chair Jennifer Holmes at the ARCH Tenants' and Residents conference 2010

The ARCH Tenants' Group

A RCH is structured to ensure that it reflects the views of people who live in council homes in its internal decision-making and its external campaigning.

The Tenants' Group is a regional network of tenant representatives from ARCH member authorities across England, which covers leaseholders as well as tenants. The group held its inaugural meeting in November 2008 and its quarterly meetings since have been well attended. Tenants and leaseholders have been recruited from across England to ensure the ARCH Tenants' Group fully reflects ARCH's regional composition.

The Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) has supported ARCH in facilitating the Group. The Group has fed tenants' views into the national review of housing finance, Tenant Services Authority proposals and other key

issues affecting the sector. It has shaped a number of highly successful ARCH annual tenants' and residents' conferences.

The ARCH Tenants' Group is a sub-group of the ARCH executive board, which comprises local authorities elected at the association's AGM. The chair of the Group is the resident representative on the ARCH executive board and acts as a liaison point between the two. Executive Board meeting minutes and Tenants' Group meeting minutes are shared between the two entities via the members' only area on the association's website.

The ARCH Tenants' Group elected Jennifer Holmes as chair at its Annual General Meeting in London on 21st March 2011. She will now chair the Group, represent tenants on the Executive Board and ensure the views of people who live in council properties are reflected in ARCH policies and activities.



What Tenants' Group members have to say

There are eighteen tenant representatives in the group from across England. Here are some of their views:

Marlene Price

The association recruited Marlene Price (pictured left), who lives in the London Borough of Wandsworth, as resident representative on its board when it was first established. Mrs Price set up the Tenants' Group, acted as its first chair and remains one of its active members. She has lived on the York Road estate since April 1982 and has been a resident representative on a number of bodies.

She says: 'I believe in everyone getting a fair deal as residents in stock retained properties were not receiving the same level of financial support as the other housing options. I have fought for that in my work with ARCH and I will continue to passionately advocate for this equality.'

John Ranshaw

John Ranshaw (pictured centre) has been a Lincoln City Council tenant for ten years. He lives in a first floor flat in a tower block. He moved to Lincoln in the 1980s and lived

in private accommodation before the city council housed him when he became homeless. He says: 'I value having a stable long-term tenancy. That can help with the rest of your life. Links between the housing department and other services are good.'

He is involved in the Stamp End Tenants and Residents' Association. He is also a member of the Lincoln Tenants' Panel and was chosen to be the representative linking that with the ARCH Tenants' Group. He says: 'If councils build they are creating local employment.'

Kevin Lovatt

Kevin Lovatt (pictured right) has been a Stoke City Council tenant for 27 years and brought up his three children in a local authority home. He first got involved in tenant governance as a mystery shopper and then sat on a steering group, which resulted in a decision to retain the properties within local authority ownership and management. 'Owning the stock makes a difference. If you have a good estate like mine, it is not just about the housing it's about everything to do with the community. People have been made redundant and can't afford mortgages. Council housing is highly important.'

He has been involved in a number of bodies including service review and improvement groups, as well as being the council's representative on the ARCH Tenants' Group.

ARCH was set up for councils whose tenants have chosen the local authority as their landlord.



- ***A stronger voice for one million people who live in council homes***
- ***Collective advocacy for fairer finance and better opportunities for stock retainers***
- ***Best practice sharing and performance improvement***
- ***Conferences and seminars***
- ***Expert policy analysis and research on key issues***
- ***Support and information network for residents, officers and elected members in stock retained authorities***
- ***A Tenants' Group network of representatives***

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Visit the ARCH website:

Full information on ARCH – including latest news, its full range of policy briefings and responses to Government consultations and reports on events – can be found on its website:

www.arch-housing.org.uk

ARCH's tenants' area, containing resources for residents in stock retained authorities and reports on meetings can be found at:

www.arch-housing.org.uk/tenants.html